

The SKELETON FINGER

By Heaton Hall

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CHAPTER I What the Crow Dropped

AUTUMN splendor was ablaze in the coverts of Beechwood Grange. And there was the more material spectacle of a trestle table in the center of the glade, being loaded with creature comforts by two footmen in morning livery. The men worked rapidly, as the cries of beaters and the popping of twelve-bores heralded the approach of the sportsmen for whom the alfresco feast was laid. The finishing touches had just been put to the snowy napery and sparkling crystal when three ladies sauntered into the glade from a bridge-path. "Thank goodness!" wheezed the elder of the trio, a stout woman with purple complexion and an auburn wig. "There is a table to eat off and chairs to sit on. Knives and forks, too, and quite an array of glasses. I was afraid we were expected to squat on the ground and drink beer out of mugs."

"Oh, my dear Lady Marrables, that's a bit rough on Sir Dudley," laughed the next in point of age, a handsome woman of thirty. "You ought to know him well enough to be sure that he wouldn't treat us like that. Besides, as our hostess, you probably made the arrangements and are responsible for all this arcadian luxury."

"Hostess?" sniffed the pletioch dowager. "I am no hostess, only chaperon to this naughty child, who's better able to take care of me than I am of her. It's a well-paid sinecure, my job 'is, and I don't repine, do I, Kathleen?"

The tall girl to whom the appeal was made smiled kindly on the speaker, but before she could reply the head of a little procession appeared at the opposite side of the glade, in single file as it debouched from another woodland path, but lurching into a cluster in the wider space. Discussing the morning's sport with the gravity befit-

ting such an occasion, the "guns" of Sir Dudley Glenister's first big shoot of the season advanced to the luncheon table.

Not only was it the first big shoot of the season, but the first occasion of the kind on which Sir Dudley had played the host. He had only enjoyed the title and estates for six months, his immediate predecessor having died two years before in America under circumstances entailing delay in the succession till presumption of his cousin George Glenister's death was legally granted by the High Court. According to the evidence procured by the family solicitors, George Glenister had, without knowing it, been a baronet for no more than a week when he was shot in a bar-room brawl.

Sir Dudley, leading his guests across the glade, seemed to be basking in the smiles of the belated good fortune which had pitched him into a baronetcy carrying a fine old mansion and a rent roll of twenty thousand a year. A fine figure of a man, in the prime of life, with a loud voice and hearty manners, he might have been a country gentleman all the time. Perhaps his clothes helped the illusion, for from the crown of his burbery hat to his natty leggings he was dressed for the part to the minutest detail.

The men handed their guns to their loaders—all but Frank Glenister, a sixteen-year-old Eton boy who was so proud of his new weapon that he refused to part with it, laying it on the ground beside him and slyly choosing the end seat for that purpose. Sir Dudley sat at the head of the table, with the pletioch dowager on his right, the others ranging themselves casually, all but a tall soldierly young man who was at pains to maneuver himself into the chair next Kathleen Glenister. This was Norman Slater, a dis-

tant connection by marriage of Lady Marrables, and a captain in the Rifle Brigade. Sir Dudley regarded him with scant favor and had only invited him to the Grange because the old lady had frankly declined to come herself unless Norman was asked. And Lady Marrables, as Kathleen's guardian, being indispensable, the young officer had been included in the small house party. Sir Dudley was

Kathleen's father, and Norman Slater was a son of one of her deceased husband's sisters. Another male guest staying in the house was the silent, rumi-native man with a sharp, hatched like face and cavernous eyes, who in an evident fit of abstraction sat down on the other side of Kathleen. Doctor Willoughby Melville, the nerve specialist from Harley Street, owed his invitation to professional

house party was Frank Glenister, the Eton boy who would not be separated from his gun. He, also, was of the younger branch lately brought to the front by the hand of Death. As the son of a brother of Dudley, killed in an Indian frontier skirmish, he was heir presumptive to the title and estates. Since he was an engaging youngster, and Dudley intended to provide a more direct heir, the new baronet made much of him without any apprehensive jealousy.



Plop into the center of the luncheon table fell the grisly object.

The rest of the "guns" who gathered round the table in the glade were gentlemen from neighboring houses, brick-faced squires, a sporting parson, and one other. That exception was the exception who did not fall exactly into either category. The Right Honorable Stephen Colne, as the owner of Colbrook Towers, might have been deemed a squire, but he was certainly not brick-faced. His well-bred, intellectual countenance was of an almost unhealthy pallor, due to the long hours spent as a Cabinet Minister on the Treasury Bench.

The period of liqueurs, whiskeys and nicotine arrived. One of the brick-faced squires had taken advantage of the general somnolence to work off as original a story culled from an ancient Pink 'Un, and he was warming to the risqué climax when the words were literally jerked out of his mouth by the Eton boy, who was sitting next him.

"Mark over!" yelled the youngster, seizing his gun and leaping to his feet. The host removed his cigar and looked skyward. "Don't be a donkey, Frank," he shouted. "It's only a crow."

Frank Glenister was not to be denied. He had already crammed a cartridge into the breach—there was no time for two—and raising his gun, he fired at the bird that by now was sailing directly overhead. It was a clean miss and, sharply swerving in its flight, the crow disappeared over the tree-tops at the far side of the glade.

But it had evidently been a close call for the winged marauder, causing it to drop its plunder. Plop into the center of the luncheon table fell a dish of pears and, as it finally came to rest, confessing itself to be a fleshless finger from a human skeleton.

(To Be Continued)

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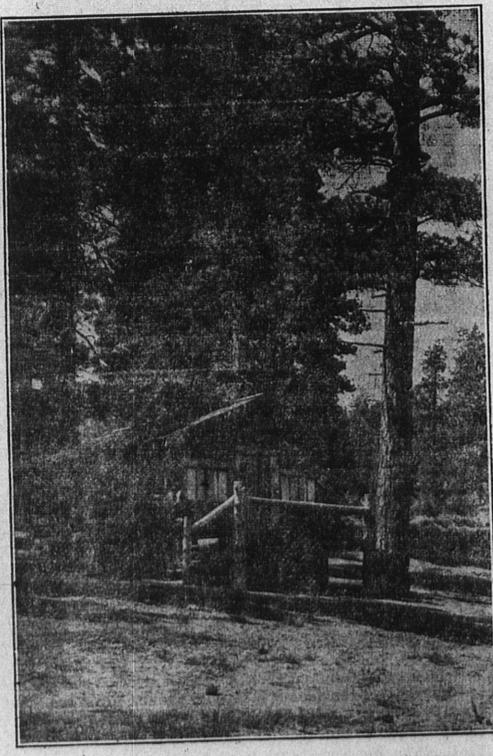
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